

## Early American Involvement in Vietnam (1954–62)

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In 1954, France gave up its colonial claims on Vietnam. But even as France prepared to leave the region, the United States and other democratic nations continued to assert influence on the internal affairs of the country. Specifically, they forced Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese Communists to accept a treaty that divided Vietnam in half.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) established a Communist government in North Vietnam. At the same time, the United States government worked hard to support a non-Communist government in South Vietnam. Ignoring the 1954 Geneva Accords—which called for reunification of the country in 1956 after nationwide elections—U.S. officials threw their support behind an anti-Communist politician named Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963). At first, Diem's government seemed like a strong candidate for U.S. financial and military support. But as time passed, Diem's style of governing and the growth of political opposition to his regime (government) sparked great concern in the United States.



## Words to Know

**ARVN** The South Vietnamese army, officially known as the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam. The ARVN fought on the same side as U.S. troops during the Vietnam War.

**Buddhism** A religion based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (known as the Buddha; c. 563–c. 483 B.C.), in which followers seek moral purity and spiritual enlightenment. Buddhism was the religion of the majority of citizens of South Vietnam.

**Communism** A political system in which the government controls all resources and means of producing wealth. By eliminating private property, this system is designed to create an equal society with no social classes. However, Communist governments in practice often limit personal freedom and rights.

**Hanoi** The capital city of Communist North Vietnam. Also an unofficial shorthand way of referring to the North Vietnamese government.

**North Vietnam** The Geneva Accords of 1954, which ended the First Indochina War (1946–54), divided the nation of Vietnam into two sections. The northern section, which was led by a Communist government under Ho Chi Minh, was officially known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, but was usually called North Vietnam.

**Saigon** The capital city of U.S.-supported South Vietnam. Also an unofficial shorthand way of referring to the South Vietnamese government.

**South Vietnam** Created under the Geneva Accords of 1954, the southern section of Vietnam was known as the Republic of South Vietnam. It was led by a U.S.-supported government under Ngo Dinh Diem.

**Viet Cong** Vietnamese Communist guerilla fighters who worked with the North Vietnamese Army to conquer South Vietnam.

**Viet Minh** Communist-led nationalist group that worked to gain Vietnam's independence from French colonial rule.

## The division of Vietnam

The year 1954 marked a major turning point in the history of Vietnam. France reluctantly prepared to give up control of the country, which it had held since the late nineteenth century. At the same time, Viet Minh forces led by Ho Chi Minh hoped to establish Communist rule over the entire nation. After all, the Viet Minh had seized control of much of



## People to Know

**Bao Dai (1913–)** Vietnamese political leader who served as emperor and head of state under French colonial rule, 1926–1945 and 1949–1955.

**Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969)** A top U.S. general during World War II (1939–45) who served as the 34th president of the United States, 1953–1961. Although he was committed to stopping the spread of communism in Asia, he was reluctant to take direct military action in Vietnam.

**Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969)** Vietnamese Communist leader who led Viet Minh forces in opposing French rule and became the first president of North Vietnam in 1954. He also led the North during the Vietnam War until his death.

**John F. Kennedy (1917–1963)** Served as the 35th president of the United States

from 1960 until he was assassinated in 1963.

**Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963)** Vietnamese political leader who became president of South Vietnam in 1954. He gradually lost the support of the United States and was killed following the overthrow of his government in 1963.

**Ngo Dinh Nhu (1910–1963)** Known as Brother Nhu, he was the brother and main political advisor of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

**Madame Nhu (1924–)** Served as the unofficial first lady of South Vietnam during the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem. She was actually the wife of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu; her maiden name was Tran Le Xuan.

the country by this time. But the United States and other democratic nations objected to this plan because they did not want Vietnam controlled by Communists. As a result, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists were forced to accept a compromise.

This compromise, drawn up at the Geneva Conference of July 1954, temporarily divided Vietnam into northern and southern sections. The Viet Minh received the northern half of the country above the 17th parallel. The southern portion of the country below the 17th parallel went to non-Communists. According to the Geneva Accords, however, this arrangement was only supposed to be temporary. The treaty called for



**Ngo Dinh Diem served as the president of South Vietnam during the early years of the Vietnam War. Diem initially gained the support of the United States because of his strong opposition to communism.**

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national elections to be held in both zones in 1956 to create a united Vietnamese government.

As soon as the Geneva settlement was reached, both North and South Vietnam scrambled to strengthen their positions and establish their governments. As the leader of the Viet Minh forces that had forced France to surrender its grip on Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh was the obvious choice to take over leadership of North Vietnam. In the South, meanwhile, the United States wanted to make sure that the government had a strong anti-Communist leader. They pressured Emperor Bao Dai (1913–), who held little actual political power, to appoint a man named Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister.

## **Ngo Dinh Diem becomes leader of South Vietnam**

The United States government liked Ngo Dinh Diem for several reasons. A strong anti-Communist and opponent of French rule, Diem was viewed as someone who had always been dedicated to creating a united and independent Vietnam. In addition, he had become acquainted with many U.S. religious and political leaders during the early 1950s, when fears about his safety in French-ruled Vietnam led him to relocate to Europe and the United States. American officials believed that he might represent a legitimate “third force” in Vietnamese politics—a figure who was neither a Communist nor connected to the nation’s unpopular French colonial governments.

On July 7, 1954, Bao Dai appointed Diem as prime minister. Upon assuming power, Diem worked with the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to increase political support for his government. They agreed that one of the best ways to do this was to convince Vietnamese Catholics living in the North to relocate to the South. Diem was a member of the Roman Catholic religious faith. Buddhists, however, accounted

for ninety to ninety-five percent of the South's total population. This concerned Diem, who believed that he could broaden support for his government by convincing other Catholics to come to South Vietnam.

Diem knew, however, that he only had a limited amount of time to convince northern Catholics to relocate. According to the terms of the Geneva Accords, both North and South Vietnam agreed to hold off on formally establishing the boundary dividing the two nations until October 1954. The two sides agreed to this provision so that French troops still in the North could withdraw peacefully and so that Vietnamese people could move from one region to the other if they wished.

Approximately 80,000 people from South Vietnam went north during this time. Most of these people were Viet Minh fighters who wanted to live in Ho Chi Minh's Communist society. But a far greater number of Vietnamese traveled from north to south. The majority of these people were Catholics who left North Vietnam for a variety of reasons. Some expressed fears about religious persecution at the hands of the Communist government. Others were lured by Diem's promises of valuable land grants or frightened by CIA warnings that North Vietnam might someday be the target of an American nuclear attack.

The promises and scare tactics employed by the Diem government and the CIA worked extremely well. Over several weeks, an estimated 850,000 people migrated south, most of them Catholics and small land owners. The South Vietnamese and American governments later claimed that this mass exodus from the North showed that the Vietnamese people did not want to live under Communist rule.

## **Diem's family dominates government**

As both prime minister and president of South Vietnam, Diem held enormous influence over the nation's government. After settling in the capital city of Saigon, he quickly appointed close family members to many of the most important positions in his new government. In many cases, however, these appointments were not good for the country. For example, Diem made his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu (1910–1963) his most important political advisor and chief of the country's secret police.

Nhu—known as “Brother Nhu” to the international media—was an intelligent, educated man. But he quickly gained a reputation as a corrupt and ruthless official who resorted to terror and murder to protect his many criminal activities. Brother Nhu’s wife, Madame Nhu (maiden name Tran Le Xuan), acted as first lady and official hostess for South Vietnam’s unmarried president. Ambitious and energetic, Madame Nhu soon became known both for her beauty and her greedy and vengeful personality. Together, Nhu and his wife exercised considerable control over Diem and his government.

Other members of Diem’s family held important positions as well. His brother Ngo Dinh Can controlled the region around Hue, Vietnam’s second largest city. Diem’s older brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, was an important bishop in South Vietnam’s Catholic Church. And many of Diem’s cousins and in-laws were given important national and provincial government posts. These arrangements further strengthened Diem’s hold over the South Vietnam government. But many of these appointments ultimately proved disastrous for the nation. A number of Diem’s relatives were terribly corrupt, and many of his closest relatives did not have the skills or personalities to manage their important responsibilities. “[Diem and his family were] the most neurotic family I’ve ever known, *even in history*,” recalled *Time* reporter Charles Mohr. “They simply were a bunch of dingbats.”

## **Diem establishes Republic of Vietnam**

The 1954 Geneva Accords called for national elections to be held in Vietnam’s two zones in 1956. The winner of these elections would then take control of the entire nation, which would be reunified. But Diem and his U.S. supporters ignored this provision of the agreement. They feared that if these elections were held, North Vietnam’s Communist government would win. In fact, the United States never actually signed the Geneva Accords—although it pledged to honor the agreement—because of these fears. As U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969; president 1953–1961) later admitted, “if the elections had been held in 1956, Ho Chi Minh would have won 80 percent of the vote.”

Instead, Diem devoted his energies to consolidating his power in the South. During the spring of 1955, Diem

mounted effective attacks on a number of ethnic minorities and criminal sects, which had built their own private armies over the years. His main targets were the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects and the Binh Xuyen force, which controlled many of Saigon's underworld criminal activities. He also made sure that Roman Catholics occupied most of South Vietnam's important political and military positions. This favoritism triggered considerable anger among the country's non-Catholic Buddhist majority, but Diem believed that he would be more secure if he was surrounded by Catholics.

As the months passed, Diem ignored North Vietnamese efforts to make arrangements for the 1956 elections. Instead, he and his American allies moved ahead with their own plan. In October 1955, Diem defeated Bao Dai in a presidential election to determine future leadership of South Vietnam. Diem received better than ninety-eight percent of the vote in the contest, for which Bao Dai did not actively campaign. In fact, Bao Dai remained in his home in France throughout this time. Nonetheless, some historians suggest that the vote may have been rigged in Diem's favor.

A few days after the election, on October 26, 1955, Diem established South Vietnam as a separate country formally known as the Republic of Vietnam. Over the next several months he formed a permanent National Assembly to serve as the country's main legislative body. He also took steps to strengthen the South Vietnamese army, known as the ARVN (Army of the Republic of South Vietnam). Diem was helped in this effort by an American military unit called Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam (MAAG-Vietnam). This group was formed in November 1955 to provide military training, aid, and support to the South Vietnamese army. By early 1956, Ngo Dinh Diem's political and military maneuverings had placed him firmly in control of South Vietnam.

## Violence in North Vietnam

Diem's strong performance frustrated North Vietnam's Communist leaders, who had thought that his government would collapse. And his refusal to hold elections to reunite the country infuriated Ho Chi Minh and other Communist officials. North Vietnam's prime minister Pham Van Dong, for

example, called it “a blatant violation of the Geneva Agreements.” But at first, the North Vietnamese government, based in Hanoi, decided not to launch any violent campaigns to disrupt Diem’s rule. As former CIA Director William Colby recalls in *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War*, “The Communists had a full job organizing North Vietnam for the first two or three years. They went through land reform that managed to create an enormous famine. They killed a lot of landlords and things of this nature.”

Indeed, the situation in North Vietnam became very grim in the mid-1950s. After the Geneva Accords of 1954, Ho Chi Minh and other Communist leaders concentrated on building a socialist society in the North (socialism is a political doctrine that calls for state ownership and control of industry, agriculture, and distribution of wealth). North Vietnamese leaders subsequently worked to replace the region’s village and family-oriented economies with government-controlled industries and agricultural practices.

As part of this plan, the Communists started a land reform campaign in the mid-1950s. These programs were meant to distribute privately owned land to poor and landless people. But the land reform campaign soon turned vicious. Thousands of people who had previously owned land or were thought to be unfriendly to communism were put in prison or executed. Estimates of the numbers of Vietnamese killed during this period range from 30,000 to as many as 100,000.

In October 1956, the government finally ended the bloody program. It then launched a “rectification of errors” program to punish people who had gotten carried away during the land reform campaign. This program resulted in the imprisonment of another 12,000 people branded as “exploiters” and the dismissal of many party officials.

During the late 1950s, the situation in North Vietnam stabilized. The country, now formally known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), completed its transition to a communist way of life. The nation’s economic development during this time was guided by government strategies known as the Three-Year-Plan (1958–60) and the Five-Year-Plan (1961–65). These plans were meant to increase the North’s industrial base by nationalizing former French-owned industries and developing mining and hydroelectric projects

throughout the country. The Communists were helped in these efforts by both the Chinese and Soviet governments.

## **Growing American doubts about Diem**

When Ngo Dinh Diem assumed power in the mid-1950s, the United States viewed him as the best candidate to keep South Vietnam out of Communist hands. With that in mind, America provided him with a great deal of political, economic, and military assistance. Led by U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1888–1959), the United States even created a regional alliance called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). This organization extended U.S. protection to South Vietnam and the neighboring countries of Cambodia and Laos in case of Communist “subversion” (attempts to overthrow their governments).

As time passed, however, U.S. officials became divided about the wisdom of supporting the Diem government. They liked his fierce anti-Communist views and his swift steps to stabilize the government in South Vietnam. But Diem’s government also came to be viewed as a secretive and corrupt one that resisted American calls to give the South Vietnamese people increased personal rights and economic opportunities.

The attitudes displayed by members of Diem’s government caused concern among some American military leaders and diplomats. In 1955, for example, General Joseph L. Collins recommended reducing U.S. support because of Diem’s refusal to make democratic reforms. “I am . . . convinced Diem does not have the knack of handling men nor the executive capacity truly to unify the country and establish an effective government,” he said.

Two years later, Eldridge Durbrow, who served as U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam from 1957 to 1961, voiced similar doubts. “Diem has avoided making decisions required to build the economic and social foundations necessary to secure Viet Nam’s future independence and strength,” wrote Durbrow. “He has made it clear that he would give first priority to the build-up of his armed forces regardless of the country’s requirements for economic and social development.” Durbrow



## Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969)

Dwight D. Eisenhower served the United States as both a military general and president, making him one of the most important public figures of the mid-twentieth century. Born in Texas and raised in Kansas, he chose a career in the U.S. military. In World War II (1939–45) he became supreme commander over all Allied forces in Europe, ultimately guiding them to victory over Germany. After World War II, he became the first commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance of European and North American nations (including the United States) against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and other Communist powers.

In 1952, Eisenhower won the Republican nomination for the U.S. presidency, and in November of that year he defeated Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson (1900–1965) to succeed outgoing president Harry Truman (1884–1972; president 1945–1953). In early 1953, Eisenhower was sworn in as America's 34th president.

Eisenhower served two four-year terms as president before leaving office in 1961. He was a popular president who led the United States during a period of general economic prosperity. During his presidency, America created the national highway system, built the St. Lawrence Seaway, and experienced great economic growth. Eisenhower also used federal troops to enforce Supreme Court rulings calling for integration of schools and other public institutions in the United States.

Eisenhower is perhaps best remembered, however, for his Cold War attitudes and policies. Eisenhower distrusted the Soviet Union and hated communism, and he actively worked against Communist governments and organizations throughout his presidency. For example, he approved significant financial assistance to French military forces engaged in Vietnam throughout the second half of the Indochina War (1946–54).

But Eisenhower resisted calls from some U.S. congressmen for massive increases in military spending, and he

also claimed that Diem's reliance on Catholics and wealthy land owners for support was alienating the rest of the South Vietnamese population.

But Diem and his family continued to resist American calls to implement democratic reforms. They wanted the financial aid from the United States, but they did not want to be told



**Dwight D. Eisenhower, speaking with a group of paratroopers.** *Reproduced by permission of the National Archive Photos and Records Administration.*

turned down U.S. military recommendations that he launch first-strike nuclear attacks against the Soviets. The Eisenhower administration also clashed with Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957) over his controversial investigations of alleged Communist activity within the U.S. government (McCarthy’s ruthless

efforts to uncover Communists are now regarded as an unfortunate chapter in American history).

Eisenhower’s stands on these issues were based on his belief that if communism was simply contained—rather than destroyed—it would eventually collapse because of its own faults. “This will take a long time,” he said, “but our most realistic policy is holding the line until the Soviets manage to educate their people. By doing so, they will sow the seeds of their own destruction.”

After leaving office, Eisenhower publicly supported the Vietnam policies of presidents John F. Kennedy (1917–1963; president 1960–1963) and Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973; president 1963–1969). Privately, however, he complained that neither leader used sufficient military force in Vietnam. As the war progressed, Eisenhower also became fiercely hostile to the views and activities of many members of America’s antiwar movement. He supported U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War up until his death in 1969.

how to run their country. As time passed, the Diem government continued to make policies that troubled U.S. officials. For example, much of the country’s wealth and power remained in the hands of a small Catholic minority, most of whom lived in Saigon and a couple of other cities. In addition, Diem took ruthless steps to stamp out Communist political opposition.

As Diem's last military chief, General Tran Van Don, later wrote in *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam*, Diem and his family "resorted to arbitrary arrests, confinement in concentration camps for undetermined periods of time without judicial guarantees or restraints, and assassinations of people suspected of Communist leanings. Their use of Gestapo-like police raids and torture were known and decried everywhere." Soon, the government began using these tactics against non-Communists as well. "The repression . . . spread to people who simply opposed their regime, such as heads or spokesmen of other political parties, and against individuals who were resisting extortion [use of force or intimidation to obtain wealth or cooperation] by some of the government officials," said the general.

Despite concerns about some aspects of Diem's rule, however, most American officials believed that he was their only hope for keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands. As a result, the Eisenhower administration declared its continued support for his government. In May 1957, for example, Diem was invited to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress. At the same session, President Eisenhower proclaimed that "the cost of defending freedom, of defending America, must be paid in many forms and many places. Vietnam cannot at this time produce and support the military formations essential to its survival. Military as well as economic help is currently needed in Vietnam."

## Problems in the countryside

During the late 1950s, the situation in South Vietnam became more explosive. In late 1957, southern Communists assassinated several hundred village officials and schoolteachers around the country in retaliation for Diem's crackdown. In January 1958, these guerrillas (small groups of fighters who launch surprise attacks), who were the last remnants of the Viet Minh forces that had helped end French rule, attacked a number of Diem supporters living in the Saigon area. These raids angered and worried Diem, who introduced the term "Viet Cong" to describe the attackers. This term, an abbreviation for Vietnamese Communists, quickly became the most widely used term for the Vietnamese Communist fighters operating in the South.

Most historians believe that North Vietnam still hoped to unite the country through an election rather than through warfare during this period. Communist leaders worried that if they tried to take South Vietnam by force, the United States would use its military might on behalf of Diem. With this in mind, in March 1958, the North suggested holding new talks with the South to iron out their differences and plan for an eventual reunification. But Diem flatly rejected any such discussions until North Vietnam adopted “democratic liberties similar to those existing in the South.” This language was a little embarrassing to America, since Diem had resisted all U.S. advice to make South Vietnam more democratic. But the United States supported Diem’s stand because it still feared that a unified Vietnam would choose a Communist government.

In 1959, the Viet Cong increased their activities in rural areas of South Vietnam, where dissatisfaction with Diem was strongest. These regions were populated by Buddhists and ethnic minorities who felt as though Diem’s government was mistreating them and ignoring their needs in favor of its wealthy, Catholic supporters. This anti-Diem atmosphere made it possible for the Viet Cong to gain control of significant sections of the countryside. At the same time, the Viet Cong continued to lobby the North Vietnamese government for military assistance. The North’s political leadership finally agreed that the only way they would be able to reunite the divided country would be to take up arms once again. From this point forward, North Vietnam began preparing for war.

## **Communists mobilize against Diem**

In May 1959, North Vietnam began building a trail that would allow it to secretly transport supplies, troops, and communications into South Vietnam and back into the North. General Vo Bam supervised the construction of this trail, which officials called the Truong Son Route. The pathway eventually became better known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was built in Laos, the country immediately to the west of Vietnam. It extended down the spine of the Chaîne Annamitique mountains in eastern Laos to supply stations in the jungles of South Vietnam. By the time it was completed in the mid-1960s, it was 12,500 miles long and



## **“Secret War” in Laos**

During the 1950s and early 1960s in Indochina, armed struggle between Communist and non-Communist forces was not limited to Vietnam. This fight could also be seen in Laos, a country along the northwestern border of Vietnam.

Laos is a country with a history similar to that of Vietnam in several important respects. Both countries enjoyed a long period of self-rule that ended in the nineteenth century, when European colonialism swept through Southeast Asia. By the late nineteenth century, both Laos and Vietnam were controlled by France. And like Vietnam, Laos also was occupied by Japanese forces during World War II (1939–45).

In 1947, France gave Laos limited independence, and six years later it

granted the Laotian people full independence. But once Laos received its independence, it became paralyzed by violent disputes between various political factions. The main groups in this battle for control of the nation were the Pathet Lao (Lao Nation), a Communist movement that received support from Ho Chi Minh’s Communist Vietnamese forces, and the Royal Lao, a non-Communist government supported by France.

In 1954, the Geneva Conference was held in an effort to end the Indochina War (1946–54) in Vietnam. During this meeting, Laos’ opposing forces and other countries interested in the conflict reached an agreement to end the war and withdraw all foreign troops from the country. But the Pathet Lao soon broke the

included underground barracks, hospitals, and other facilities. This intricate network of paths, invisible from the air because of the thick jungle foliage, became a vital supply route and communication lifeline for the Communists.

At the same time that the North Vietnamese military began hacking the Ho Chi Minh Trail out of the jungle, it also sent agents into the South to lead many of the Viet Cong guerrilla groups. Many of these men were recruited from southern Viet Minh troops who had moved north after the Geneva Accords. In December 1960, meanwhile, opponents of the Diem government united to form an organization called the National Liberation Front (NLF). This group was dedicated to the overthrow of Diem. It included members of a wide range

truce and resumed its rebellion with the help of North Vietnam.

The struggle for control of Laos continued until 1962, by which time both the United States and the Soviet Union were inching closer to involvement. In 1962, another round of peace talks was held in Geneva in an effort to end the fighting. In the final agreement, the Communists guaranteed the neutrality of western Laos. In exchange, the United States guaranteed that it would not invade eastern Laos. America's promise to remain neutral and stay out of eastern Laos was very important to Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists because the region contained a large section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam's primary supply and communication line into South Vietnam.

Many of the Laotian people hoped that the 1962 Geneva Conference would bring an end to the years of fighting. But their hopes were soon dashed, as the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies resumed their push to replace the existing government with a Communist one. The fight for control of the kingdom continued throughout the mid-1960s, with both the Soviets and the Americans providing military aid and supplies to their respective allies. The United States, however, provided its military and financial aid to the Laotian government in secret because of its 1962 Geneva Conference pledge to remain neutral. The United States' various efforts to aid anti-Communist forces in Laos without being detected eventually became known as America's "Secret War in Laos."

of groups who were unhappy with South Vietnam's government, but its activities were ultimately directed by North Vietnam's Communist leadership.

## **Kennedy pledges support**

By 1960, a growing number of American observers were expressing grave doubts about Diem's government, even though the United States continued to provide economic and military aid. In fact, it doubled the number of military advisors provided to the South Vietnamese military in 1960. But many military officers and government leaders wondered about the long-term stability of the Diem regime.



**American involvement in Vietnam increased during President John F. Kennedy's administration.**

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Those concerns led some U.S. officials to suggest that the United States should consider withdrawing its support for Diem and lending its help to some new leader. Other policymakers defended Diem as a good leader who was making the best of a difficult situation. But Diem sensed that U.S. support for his regime was weakening, and this realization made him even more insecure and stubborn. "The [Diem] family had survived . . . for two reasons," writes William Prochnau in *Once Upon a Distant War*. "American support and an almost total lack of credible alternative leadership in a country created by outside powers after the French defeat. Diem could be such a troublesome client, however, that the American support was not always so unstinting [reliable]—and Saigon's plotters knew it."

In November 1960, John F. Kennedy (1917–1963; president 1960–1963) was elected to succeed Eisenhower as America's next president. A few days later, a group of angry South Vietnamese paratroopers launched a coup (takeover) attempt against Diem that nearly succeeded. Diem slipped out of danger and maintained control of the government. Nonetheless, the incident demonstrated that the situation in his country was tense and unpredictable.

When Kennedy took over the presidency in January 1961, he emphasized the need for continued U.S. support of South Vietnam. Like many other people in the United States, he feared that the loss of Vietnam to the Communists would trigger a wave of Communist aggression across the globe. "No other challenge is more deserving of our every effort and energy [than Vietnam]," he said. Kennedy added that if South Vietnam was lost to the Communists, "our [nation's] security may be lost piece by piece, country by country."

In April 1961, Diem was re-elected president by an overwhelming majority. Defenders of the president claimed

that these results showed he had the support of the South Vietnamese people. One month later, Kennedy declared at a press conference that he was willing to consider the use of American military forces “to help South Vietnam resist Communist pressures.” In late 1961, the Kennedy administration swallowed its doubts about deepening U.S. involvement in the country and established a new military command—called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)—to direct the activities of U.S. troops stationed in South Vietnam.

## Mounting criticism of Diem government

Throughout 1961, the debate over the situation in South Vietnam intensified in American political and military circles. Nearly everyone agreed that the United States needed to make sure that South Vietnam did not fall to the Communists. But people disagreed wildly about whether Diem’s regime and U.S. military and economic aid was succeeding in that regard.

Some officials, such as U.S. Ambassador Frederick Nolting, offered unwavering support of Diem and his government. In his memoirs, Nolting calls President Diem “an honest and dedicated man” who was “very much concerned with the welfare of his people.” Others, such as U.S. General Paul Harkins, who served as commander of MACV from 1962 to 1964, insisted that the Diem government was stable and that the Viet Cong would soon be destroyed. But other U.S. officers and members of the Kennedy administration were not so optimistic. They charged that Harkins and other Saigon-based officials were not providing an accurate picture of events in South Vietnam. This concern was partly due to increasingly critical press coverage in the *New York Times* and other newspapers.

During this period, the U.S. government provided optimistic accounts of events in Vietnam in order to maintain public support for their efforts there. Many reporters filed stories that reflected the U.S. government’s description of events. But some members of the American and international press corps based in South Vietnam suggested that the country was in serious trouble. These accounts, filed by veteran correspondents such as Homer Bigart and David Halberstam (both of the *New York Times*), indicated that Diem’s government was corrupt and unpopular. They noted that significant sections of



## *The Quiet American*

One of the first people to warn Americans about the potential problems of getting involved in Vietnam was the British novelist Graham Greene (1904–1991). Greene was stationed in Vietnam as a war correspondent in the early 1950s, during the First Indochina War (1946–54). During this conflict, Vietnamese Communist forces known as the Viet Minh tried to take control of the country away from France, which had ruled Vietnam as a French colony for many years.

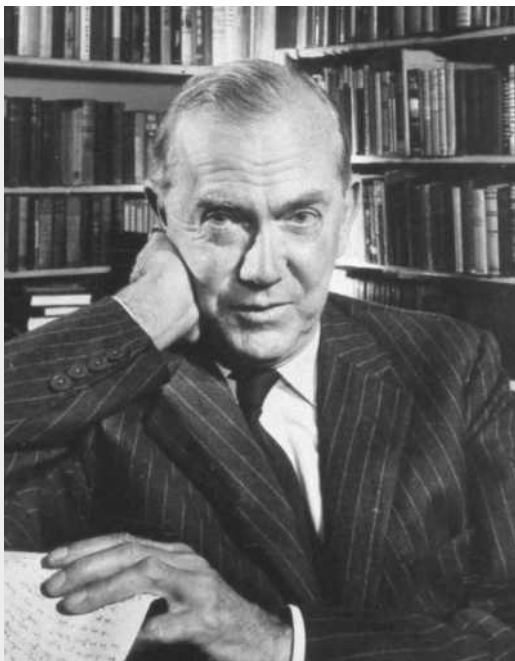
As the U.S. government grew concerned about the spread of communism following World War II (1939–45), they decided to support France in the First Indochina War. By 1954, however, the Viet Minh had scored several important victories, and France decided to negotiate a settlement. But rather than allow the Communists to take over Vietnam, the United States began sending

military advisors to establish a separate, democratic government in the South.

In 1955, Greene published a novel based on his experiences in Vietnam during the transition from French control to U.S. involvement. *The Quiet American* tells the story of an idealistic U.S. military advisor, Alden Pyle, who secretly tries to create a new, democratic government in Vietnam. Pyle is willing to use any means to accomplish his mission, including violence. In fact, Pyle helps a terrorist group plant bombs in busy areas of Saigon. When the bombs kill innocent people, they blame the violence on the Viet Minh. In this way, Pyle hopes to increase support for a U.S.-friendly government.

Greene used the character of Pyle to show his feelings about U.S. policies toward Vietnam. After spending time in the country, the author came to love and respect the Vietnamese people and culture.

the country were controlled by the Viet Cong, at least during the nighttime. They also reported that the South Vietnamese army—known as the ARVN—was completely dependent on U.S. military equipment and intelligence. Finally, many press reports indicated that ARVN commanders were afraid to risk a defeat against Viet Cong forces because of Diem's reputation for punishing officers who reported casualties. These factors made it impossible for U.S. military advisors to organize any effective counterattack on the growing Viet Cong presence in South Vietnam's rural villages and towns.



**Novelist Graham Greene.**

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He believed that the U.S. government misunderstood the Viet Minh and the nature of their revolution against French rule. He felt that the Viet Minh were driven to make war because of nationalism (an intense loyalty and devotion to their

country and way of life) rather than a desire for communism. For this reason, Greene believed that the United States was wrong to interfere in Vietnamese attempts to overthrow the French and establish their own, independent government.

*The Quiet American* created quite a stir when it was published in 1955. Many reviewers criticized it as “anti-American” and “pro-Communist.” In fact, leaders of the Soviet Union praised the novel and even published excerpts in the Communist newspaper *Pravda*. But as time passed, more and more of the things Greene predicted in his novel came true. As the United States increased its military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s, the country also started feeling some of the negative effects that Greene had warned about. Later reviewers praised the novel for its accurate predictions of the tragic consequences of American military involvement in Vietnam.

Even though they were mostly accurate, such reports angered U.S. military leaders based in Saigon and Kennedy administration officials in Washington, D.C. The officials wanted the press to repeat their reassuring public statements that the Diem government was prospering and the Viet Cong threat was fading away. But the reporters refused to go along. Instead, they continued to submit stories that showed their own impressions of the situation in South Vietnam. At this point, few reporters questioned America’s decision to become involved in Vietnam. But their observations led them to believe that the early strategies

taken by Diem and U.S. policymakers to protect South Vietnam were ineffective. In any case, these critical reports soon created a hostile relationship between the American press and the U.S. military that endured throughout most of the Vietnam War.

Not surprisingly, the negative American press coverage angered Diem and his family as well. He repeatedly contacted American officials and demanded an end to the critical press reports. Of course, U.S. government officials responded that they did not have the power to silence them. As Prochnau writes, "Diem could never understand why the Americans could not control their reporters the same way he controlled his."

## **United States increases military and financial aid**

Throughout 1961, U.S. President Kennedy received conflicting advice on how to handle the military and political situation in South Vietnam. Some people encouraged him to abandon Diem and withdraw from South Vietnam. Others insisted that the nation could be saved from the Communists by an increase in American military and economic aid.

In October 1961, Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor and advisor Walt Rostow to Saigon on a fact-finding mission. When they returned, they advised Kennedy to increase the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam in order to reassure Diem and scare the Viet Cong. They also told Kennedy that the country remained a vital prize in the battle against communism, but that the risk of being drawn into a long war there was small.

After discussing the Taylor-Rostow Report with his advisors, Kennedy decided to boost financial aid to Diem. He also provided the South Vietnamese with a wide range of new military equipment, and sent the first American helicopter units, called Eagle Flights, to South Vietnam. The 300 American pilots of these aircraft received orders to lead Vietnamese troops into battle but not engage in combat themselves, unless in self-defense.

In addition, the president ordered more U.S. military advisors into South Vietnam, including a detachment of Special Forces soldiers known as Green Berets. These Green Beret units—so-called because of their distinctive headgear—were

designed to organize and train guerrilla bands behind enemy lines. The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam thus increased from 600 to about 15,000 within one year. Many of these new troops became actively involved in combat direction, even though they were technically just “advisors” to the ARVN.

This infusion of new U.S. personnel, equipment, and financial aid provided a needed lift to the Diem regime. But even so, the South Vietnamese leader’s grip on power continued to slip. On February 27, 1962, a few dissatisfied South Vietnamese air force officers bombed Diem’s presidential palace. American and international reporters seized upon the bombing as evidence that popular support for Diem had collapsed.

## Strategic Hamlets Program

In early 1962, the South Vietnam government and the CIA launched a controversial program designed to reduce support for Viet Cong guerrillas in rural farming communities, where they had become a major presence. This effort was a new version of a short-lived 1959 program called Agroville, in which rural villagers were uprooted and forced to build new villages designed to isolate them from the Viet Cong. The Agroville program, however, had been quickly abandoned because of peasant resistance.

The 1962 initiative, called the Strategic Hamlets Program, was similar to the Agroville plan in most respects. It moved rural communities from traditional villages into government-sponsored concrete villages, where the people were trained to defend themselves. By the end of 1962, more than 3,000 strategic hamlets had been built under the supervision of Ngo Dinh Nhu (Brother Nhu).

Supporters of the Strategic Hamlets plan argued that these fortified villages, some of which included ARVN troops, would serve as a network of forts against Viet Cong forces operating in the countryside. But the villagers bitterly resented these forced relocations. Many of the peasants worked land that had belonged to their families for many generations. They did not want to leave their traditional homes to go live in unfamiliar concrete villages surrounded by barbed wire.

Critics of the Strategic Hamlets Program insisted that the whole scheme was a disaster. They claimed that the concrete hamlets resembled concentration camps, and that most of the villagers who were forced to move into them were deeply unhappy. Opponents of the plan even argued that it increased peasant hostility toward the South Vietnam government and made them more likely to side with the Communists. Finally, they claimed that the hamlets did not even succeed in their basic goal of separating the villagers from the Viet Cong. They cited numerous instances in which Viet Cong forces entered the hamlets, either to terrorize the occupants or to recruit new soldiers. "The Viet Cong claim we use U.S. barbed wire and iron stakes to confine the people," wrote South Vietnamese General Nguyen Huu Co. "With the loathing and hatred the people already have, when they hear the seemingly reasonable Viet Cong propaganda, they turn to the side of the Viet Cong and place their confidence in them."

At first, high-level representatives of the United States and South Vietnam praised the Strategic Hamlets Program. Gradually, however, American and South Vietnamese officials were forced to admit that the program was a failure. Efforts to maintain the program ended by late 1963, and occasional efforts to revive it later never succeeded.

## **Increase involvement or withdraw?**

As debate raged over the effectiveness of the Strategic Hamlets Program, the Kennedy administration worked very hard to determine the true situation in South Vietnam. But military officers, diplomats, and other officials continued to offer dramatically different interpretations of Diem's government and the progress of the campaign against the Viet Cong. For example, White House aide Arthur J. Schlesinger recalled an early 1963 meeting of the National Security Council. During this meeting, the council and President Kennedy heard reports from two men who had recently returned from South Vietnam, General Victor Krulak and State Department official Joseph A. Mendenhall. "Krulak said that everything in Vietnam was going fine," recalls Schlesinger. According to Krulak's report, "Diem is a much loved figure, the morale is high, and all we need do is just back him to the end and he will win the war."

Then Mendenhall reported and said Diem was extremely unpopular, the regime was in a very precarious state, the Buddhists dislike him, the liberal democrats dislike him and he does not provide any kind of possible basis for a successful American policy. President Kennedy listened very carefully and said finally, 'Were you two gentlemen in the same country?'"

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